



Regional destination marketing and websites as marketing tool

Study case: Nature Park Lahn-Dill Bergland, Germany

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Supervisor Mr. Kristian Sievers <p>This thesis gives a deeper understanding of destination marketing and branding in a wider sense. More specifically, the main focus is put on the brand communication through websites of regional destination marketing organizations in Germany.</p> <p>The work demonstrates the complexity of the destination branding process and that this is something very difficult to influence and to lead. The significance of promoting and communicating a destination brand shows that destination marketing is as much a strategic as it is a tactical process. Especially, destination branding is closely linked to strategic processes as it is also linked to the destination image. Designing and acceptance of a brand requires a close involvement of all destination stakeholders. Nowadays, this process is strongly influenced by technology development such as Internet. Websites provide cheap and effective marketing tool for destinations, as well as the chance to develop and customize destination portals.</p> <p>The project-based thesis shows the principles and potential of destination websites as marketing tool. Thus, the project outcome of this thesis is a suggestion of a renewed website in terms of content structure and design. The designing process of the website included several internal meetings with a decision maker from the contracting marketing organization during a period of four months. Results of the project indicate that destination marketing organizations find the development and maintenance of an attractive destination portal difficult and costly since there is often a lack of budgets, know-how, time, and personnel resources for such marketing activities.</p>	
Key words Destination marketing, place branding, and destination website development	

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1 Introduction

In the first section, the reader is introduced into the relationship between rural development, tourism, and place marketing in Germany. A problem discussion regarding the topic area is finally leading to the purpose of this work. The following task description and limitations give a vast understanding of the dimension of this project-based thesis.

1.1 Destination marketing in rural tourism

The German politician, Görig (2007) lays stress on the importance of regional policy and the right of same living conditions in rural sections as in urban centres. Basically, 85 percent of Germany consists of rural areas with different cultural characteristics that are crucial for the national landscape. Ideal regional policy goes beyond the traditional agrarian policy and supports a sustainable development, since there is no future potential of traditional agriculture. According to Görig (2007), rural regions need to have also adequate infrastructure and future-oriented economy structures to attract people. However, rural districts serve the nation in several aspects such as provider for foods and other ecological products, location in reserve or as nearby recreational area as well (Görig 2007.)

Görig (2007) puts attention on the growing competitive pressure between rural areas and urban centres. Developments of transportation techniques and the information and communication technology reduce physical distances. Therefore, distances are no travel barriers anymore or tourism organizations can quickly operate on a national level or even worldwide. The increasing competition between tourist rural regions is characterized by an oversupply that means tourism suppliers need to consider the situation of a buyer's market (Bär 2006, 1).

Rural regions can only distinguish themselves from competitors with optimal planning, coordination, and controlling of all activities referring to actual and potential customers. This task is adopted by destination marketing. According to Kurtz, MacKenzie and Snow (2009, 30), place marketing should attract customers to a certain area. Such areas

include cities, provinces, regions and entire countries. Place marketing does not only contain tourism purposes, but also the promotion of an ideal business location is part of place marketing. Especially, cities or regions that suffered economical disadvantages try to create a new positive image by offering leisure time activities and business opportunities (Kurtz, MacKenzie and Snow 2009, 30.)

1.2 Problem discussion

Destination marketing concepts have to consider that the basic challenge consist in the varying perception of each beholder. External people perceive the same place differently compare citizens and local businesses who are extremely influenced by own experiences. Non-local people without any personal experiences are often affected by secondary information such as TV, newspaper, magazines, radio, friends/relatives and Internet. In that connection, regional marketing are important instruments to support regional development (Regional Profil 2008.)

Nowadays, spatiotemporal independence of information flow is an important indicator of our consumer society. In that connection, Internet gains more and more importance due to increased need of information at any time and place. Experts from the German web portal, Regional Profil emphasize the future importance of Internet as the most important information channel besides word-of-mouth recommendation. Although many rural communities have a web page, the actual problem in tourism sector is based on lacking networking between tourism participants. In practice, there are often minimal administrative interests for cooperating to support local development in terms of rural destination marketing organizations. Another problem belongs to the information sharing processes are often limited by tight resources that can be connected with financial patterns, knowledge or personnel matters. Thus, a joint performance of such regions can be characterized by aimless marketing activities in terms of inappropriate Internet presence, for instance (Regional Profil 2008.)

1.3 Purpose

The final purpose of this work is the electronic presentation of a renewed destination homepage as suggestion. Suggestions are given in terms of content and design for the commissioning destination marketing organization, Lahn-Dill-Bergland (LDB).

1.4 Task description

This project-oriented thesis is based on regional marketing in a wider sense. More specifically, the focus of this project task is put on the Internet presence of LDB as a rural German destination marketing organization. LDB public society is a young Hessian association, which was founded in 1996. The major aim is the regional development of the Hessian countryside in terms of renewable energy, economy and entrepreneurship, classification of local products/services and finally rural tourism since 2007. In connection with an increasing interest in tourism as future industry, a regional nature park was established in 2007 as tourism basic concept of the whole region.

A previous survey of LDB showed that locals and visitors wished for a more structured homepage with more tourist relevant information and interactive features to communicate. In addition, this website suggestion as project outcome is a personal contribution to the development of my home region. For this purpose were no limitations given on the part of LDB. However, a small work team has been established to supervise the development of the project. A team member was Mrs. Carola Heimann as Marketing Directors of LDB, Mr. Benner as Director of a Graphic Agency (Ideografik Kreativagentur), and Katrin Simona Bopper as project executor. Regular interim meetings were placed to advice and support the actual project process.

1.5 Limitations

In reality, the task of designing a destination webpage as a whole is very comprehensive and includes communication channels for leisure and business customers. Since such a broad concept elaboration goes beyond the scope of this work and the electronically know-how. This thesis is limited to aspects of leisure customers, content examples, text

proposals, and design suggestions with emphasis on LDB as tourism destination. This work is partly based on results of a previous LDB survey, which analysed the customer satisfaction of the rural tourism concept and the existing homepage.

2 Destination marketing

The following section gives the reader an idea of destination marketing and destination branding to provide needed theoretical framework for understanding the aim of this topic. Furthermore, this part includes information about the importance of an Internet page as marketing instrument to foster the development of places.

2.1 Destination marketing principals

There is a reorientation of the traditional location policy. Consequently, redefinitions of cities and regions are necessary. A particular characteristic is the change from the macro perspective (major area or national administration) towards a micro view (local corporate and management oriented). In short, the competition of nations turns into a private sector rivalry and mainly on a regional level. In the centre of attention is management of cities, regions and destinations, instead of location policy and planning (Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 44.)

Organizations such as destination marketing organisations (DMOs) use modern marketing management methods to catch the attention of target groups (local businesses, citizens, and tourists). A boom from 1995 to 2005 rose urban marketing activities so much that nearly each advanced German city has some kind of marketing performance. However, the development of marketing within rural regions is still not that greatly developed as urban marketing concepts. Basically, such a comprehensive marketing method can be simplified to "Who is promoting (place marketer) what (place as product) to whom (target group)?" (Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 44-45.)

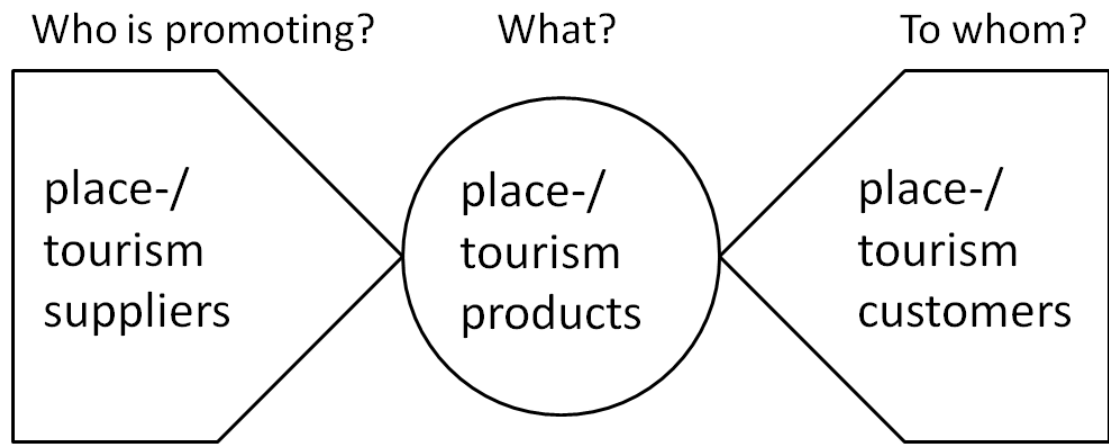


Figure 1. Basic tasks of regional marketing (Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 45)

2.1.1 Place marketing sponsor: Who promoting?

DMOs or a visitor and convention bureau coordinate and implement destination marketing or place marketing. Founding are partly provided by private sectors and principally secured by the public sector. Traditionally, DMOs were departments or agencies to market a certain districts with strong partnerships to the private sector. Currently, the trade and customers are provided by DMOs with unbiased information of a specific area. Functions of DMOs can be divided into strategic aims and tactical activities. The strategic function consists of the performance as umbrella-marketing agency. The performance of destination marketing is characterised by consolidating the role of destination partners, which is obtained through a range of tactical activities. Important activities are the creation of a destination brand to create awareness for a destination and the coordination of all shareholders. Finally, regular activities of commissioning researches give the basis for the development of a destination marketing plan, access to possible founding pools, development of the destination as product, and the control of service quality standards. Nowadays, key operations of DMOs tend more and more to destination management to create strategies that resonate with target groups and disassociate themselves from a simple focus on pure marketing. Another trend is the movement to professionalism amongst DMOs that leads to performance comparisons. Experts point on the fact that DMO performance depends on implementing innovations and partnership connections (Cooper & Hall 2007, 236-237.)

2.1.2 Place as product: What is promoted?

The second key element of the place marketing process is the product definition. In the centre of this definition should be the question “What does a certain place offer?”. Basically, the place supply is a bundle of different location factors. This bundling process is similar to tourism industry products. Freyer, Naumann and Schuler (2007, 45) refer at first to urban business locations with certain local offers. This ideal scenario is applicable to urban marketing of a city with competitive advantages such as economical factors (market size, market growth, infrastructure, competition situation, factor costs), political factors (political stability, laws, subsidies), culture factors (language, values and norms), and geographical factors (climate and topography). Non-urban areas deal with similar location factors among urban business locations. The major supply components consist of natural factors (location, landscape, flora, fauna, climate, commodities), socio-cultural factors (tradition, religion, architecture, language, mentality, culture), and the general infrastructure (transportation system, communication organization, health structure, education coordination, administration). Moreover, economical relevant location factors (industrial areas, labour force, composed wages, public subsidies, taxes, and fees) play a key role as well. Finally, there are leisure and tourism-related factors such as sport facilities, hiking trails, beach resorts, convention facilities, hotels, spas, restaurants, theatres, museums, monuments, events and so on (Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 47-48.)

These days, the above discussed traditional views of location factors are increasingly influenced by fast changing location conditions and the increased required demand-orientation of the market. In this sense, the classical supply-oriented view is replaced by demand-oriented operations. In the sense of destination marketing, market-oriented performance requires that DMOs see locations similar as a business. Thus, DMOs have to “manage” certain “products” for specific target groups and “promote” them by using modern marketing methods. Simplified, this means that habitation (for current and potential residents), economy (for current and potential investors) and tourism (for residents and tourists) are produced and marketed (Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 48-49.)

Another development of the modern marketing method is the advancement of the traditional location factors that were discussed earlier. Nowadays, place marketing is influenced by hard location factors that are not purely economical oriented anymore. Furthermore, the non-economical factors that were progressed to soft location factors. Hard and soft location factors together create the entire range of relevant determinants for an attractive location. Hard location factors include aspects such as transport connection, employment market, rent conditions, local taxes, industrial connections, environmental regulations, outlets, local founding resources, education system, and science development. Soft location factors include mainly subjective assessment and are additionally divided into business-related and personal factors. Business-related factors include, among other things, economic climate conditions, image (operating location, city, region), and career opportunities. Personal aspects relate to residential environment, environmental quality, education system, leisure offers, life quality, and cultural issues (Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 49-50.)

Freyer, Naumann and Schuler (2007, 50) emphasize that only hard together with soft factors create an attractive location. Soft factors play mainly a role for residents and visitors. Nevertheless, direct relations to tourism in such studies have never been investigated (Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 50).

2.1.3 Target group: To whom is something promoted?

Market-oriented marketing is often described as modern marketing. Corresponding, the target group definition for place marketing is a complex matter that requires a closer examination. The main interest groups can be separated into two different groups in terms of areal aspects and lead to specified further marketing activities. Firstly, there is the internal public subset such as resident businesses and citizens. Secondly, there are external stakeholders, e.g. foreign investors or tourists (Regional Profil 2010.)

It is important to mention that the public subset group has touristic importance as well. The reason is that residents are often visited by relatives and friends. Around 50 percent of official and registered overnights in Germany refer to visits of relatives and

friends. Furthermore, companies are frequently visited by business travellers. It is important that this tourism type is not a form of leisure tourism, which has to be seen in a separated way (Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 45-46.)

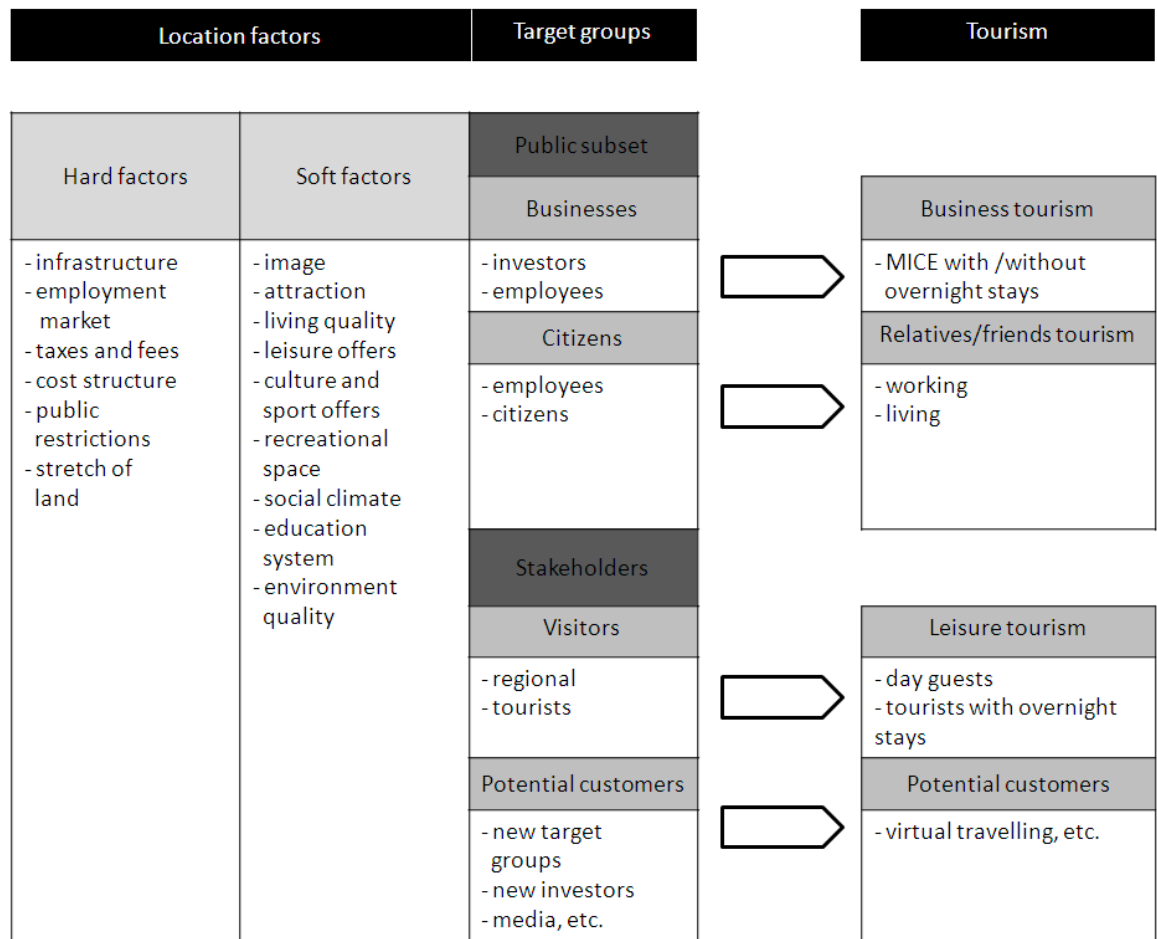


Figure 2. Different target groups and their meaning for tourism (Adapted from Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 74 and Regional Profil 2010)

In addition, the consideration of “tourists” requires a more precise differentiation between tourists with overnight-stays and day visitors. According to UNWTO, the main motivation of these visitors is shopping, business travelling, or visiting relatives/friends. However, these day visitors are also very important for many locations and support the local development than tourists (Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 47.)

2.2 Three strategic marketing approaches for places

It is important to consider that medium and long term orientation of destination management performances are central elements of modern marketing approaches. Currently, there are three basic strategies that focus on different location factors that were earlier named.

Freyer, Naumann and Schuler (2007, 54) mention at first the strategic focus on core competencies and unique selling proposition. This strategy is based in hard location factors. A further and special approach is based on organizational location factors. In this case, organizational network performances have priority. Furthermore, soft location factors enable a strategic focus on image and brand of and destination, while individual experience aspects play a role as well (Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 54.)

2.2.1 Unique selling proposition strategy

The first strategy refers to core competences and unique characteristics. This strategy is also called “Lighthouse Strategy“, which highlights the strengths of a place. In general, marketing emphasizes here on hard location factors such as economic and infrastructure relevant features. In terms of tourism, marketing activities focus on aspects such as tourism infrastructure and industry-relevant services (Bär 2006, 91; Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 54.)

2.2.2 Synergy strategy

Synergy potential results from the collaboration of companies and organizations, which is also called network or clustering. Main advantages of networks are low transaction costs among network members, which are results of intensive information and communication processes. Thus, new trends such as upcoming customer needs or innovations are shared, so that every network member benefits from this cooperation. A regional network is characterized by an agreed cooperation between participating companies and organizations within a certain region. In tourism industry, the strategic

management of touristic offerings within a certain area or place is also an example for synergy marketing (Bär 2006, 33; Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 55.)

2.2.3 Image and brand strategy

Image and brand strategy is the third and one of the most important strategies, which focuses on soft location factors. In this case, marketing consists of subjective factors such as pictures, emotions or experiences. The image plays a major role in that content and is the “softest” of all factors. External image and internal identity play a crucial role for the destination branding process. Moreover, tourism is considered as an important image factor that supports the attractiveness of a place (Freyer, Naumann & Schuler 2007, 56.)

2.3 Marketing and branding of destinations

Social and economical development of tourist destinations is the major objective of destination marketer (Pizam 2005, 156). These days, the competition of attracting tourists is increasing and the marketing strategies of private and public sector become gradually more sophisticated. In the beginning of destination marketing, destinations referred mainly to geographical areas such as islands, towns, and countries. Either today's destinations can be divided by local, regional, and national segmentation or by consumer perception that depends on travel itinerary, cultural background, purpose of visit, and education (Buhalis 2000, 97; Cooper 2008, 611; Pizam 2005, 156.)

UNWTO (2007, 13) defines a tourism destination as a certain physical area. Such destinations offer tourism infrastructure and supplement services. Physical and administrative boundaries define the management dimension of a destination, which influence the identity creation and general perception of a destination as a brand (UNWTO 2007, 13). Basically, destinations can be seen as combination of all provided products, services, and experiences. Buhalis (2000, 98) points out that all products, services, and experiences of a certain destination are consumed and perceived under the umbrella brand of a destination.

Destination branding gains increased attention within modern tourism marketing and destination management. Holloway (2004, 144) adopts the definition of Ritchie and Ritchie that a destination brand can be associated with a name, symbol, logo, word or mark. These graphic and linguistic elements can identify and differentiate a destination. Also, destination brands transfer the promise of unique travel experience or bring back pleasurable memories of special destination experience (Holloway 2004, 144; Iliachenko 2005, 4.)

According to Iliachenko (2005, 4), destination brands can be created by using unique regional features such as tourism attractors and assets. Those unique regional features construct the basis for building a brand identity of any destination. Thus, brand identities are a unique combination of visual, auditory and other stimuli to communicate a brand and form an image of a destination. Principally, destination branding includes all marketing activities to create, maintain and promote a tourism destination brand. In that content, it is important to mention that building brand recognition among current and potential tourists via branding is a time and money intensive process (Baker 2007, 44; Iliachenko 2005, 4; Kolb 2006, 219.)

After destination marketers have created a unique market message combined with symbolic components, it should be communicated and illustrated in all promotion activities for a quick association of the brand message together with the destination's benefits. Once a brand has been well established on the market, destination marketers have to continue with branding strategies to build brand loyalty so that tourists recognize the destination experience. The process of building brand loyalty is based on reminding former visitors to repeat to the destination by building a brand preference. A high brand loyalty is built on a relationship between destinations and customers (Kolb 2006, 219-220.)

2.3.1 Strategic destination branding

A successful applied destination brand is characterised by good value, quality, trust, assurance, and anticipation to customers. These characteristics can create a long-term customer relationship in order to repeat purchases and brand loyalty. At the same time,

the unique characteristics of intangible tourism products can lead to several challenges. The most critical aspects of failing destination brands are caused by weak collaboration among stakeholders. This collaboration assures a clear connection between the brand, the physical and social values of a destination. Secondly, there is often a problem to define a specific target market for destination marketers. Finally, it is difficult for destination marketers to support the overall vision of a destination by developing authentic, understandable, memorable, and usable place brand (Cai, Gartner & Munar 2009, 155-156.)

In addition, developments of effective destination brand strategies require empirical studies that include the consideration of the supply- and demand-side. The following framework organizes qualitative and quantitative research methods together with different brand elements, meanings, and assets for supply- and demand-sides. Empirical studies of the supply-side can include in-depth interviews with destination authorities, local stakeholders, and other decision makers. A further approach is the content analysis of promotional materials in cooperation with destination marketers. The perspective of the demand-side can be evaluated by the application of quantitative surveys and in-depth interviews of residents and current/potential tourists. A deeper understanding of the demand-side perspective would include a content analysis of used information sources that are provided by individual businesses within a destination. These collected data would allow a sound comparison between the projected brand and the perceived brand. The contribution of such comparisons is a strategic standpoint to develop or improve a destination brand. From a theoretical point of view, there should be a certain match between the projected and the perceived brand (Cai, Gartner & Munar 2009, 156-157.)

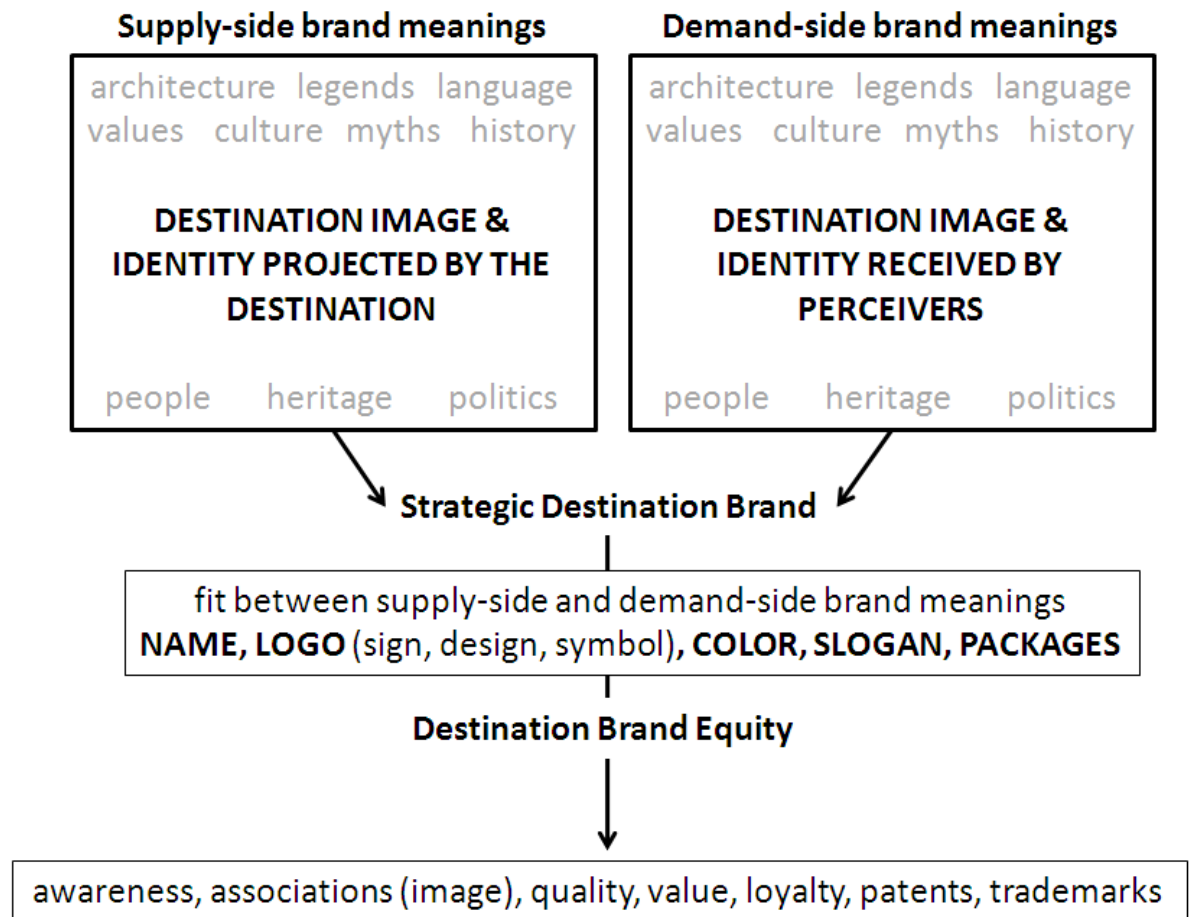


Figure 3. Framework for building strategic destination brands (Cai, Gartner & Munar 2009, 157)

2.3.2 Destination branding models

As mentioned in prior sections, destinations offer combined tourism experiences. Different destination branding models can be used to gain a clearer understanding of new and already branded tourism destinations. Two models are described in the following sections to realize the complex topic of communicating the core of a destination brand.

2.3.2.1 Relational network brand model (Hankinson model)

The brand core consists of four brand relationship categories that are shown by the Hankinson Model. These relationships of different stakeholders are characterised by dynamic and evolving processes. For instance, stakeholders might change with the de-

velopment and repositions of a brand. Destination identity plays a major role of this core brand model that expresses the blueprint for developing and communicating the place brand. In that content, it is important that brand personality, brand positioning and brand reality are defined as overall vision by one or several organizations (Dasgupta 2010, 197-198; Risitano 2006, 6.)

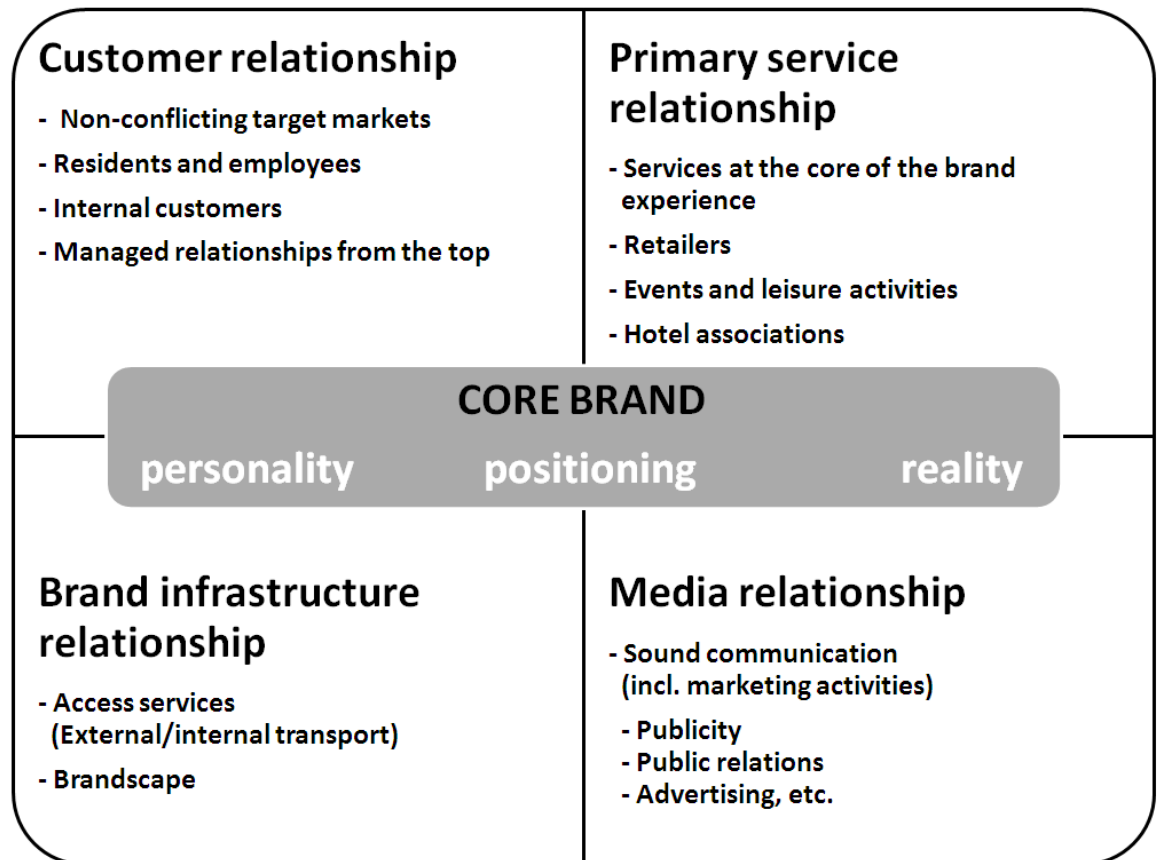


Figure 4. The relational network brand model (Dasgupta 2010, 198)

The first term, brand personality is characterised by functional, symbolic and experiential aspects of a destination. Secondly, positioning of a brand indicates the brand's point in order to identify different attributes. These attributes are separated into two sections. First, there is the recognition of attributes that show similarities between destinations. The other section of attributes indicates the uniqueness of a place. Finally, there is the term brand reality listed. Brand reality is based on the actual condition of a destination. This is not about the creation of an ideal destination image to promote a non-existing paradise (Dasgupta 2010, 197-198; Risitano 2006, 6.)

Risitano (2006, 6) expresses that in this case a successful destination branding strategy is strongly connected on an effective cooperation of all stakeholders. The reason is that every stakeholder section of these four categories extends and reinforces the brand by communication and provision of products/services. These categories of stakeholders include service providers, infrastructure service providers, media communicators, and destination customers (Risitano 2006, 6.)

2.3.2.2 Marcello Risitano's destination branding model

As motioned earlier, the destination branding process is one of the most important processes in order to create a sustainable and competitive destination. This model stresses on the definition and communication of the brand value towards tourists (Dasgupta 2010, 199). Dasgupta (2010, 199) suggests the definition of a brand identity including composing elements as first step of the branding process. Another important step is the management of brand proposition in order to analyse and measure the tourist's knowledge of the destination brand. The discussed destination branding model in this section offers two options to analyse brand equity. Firstly, there is the brand equity assessment of policymakers, destination organisations and so on (senders). The other assessment options deals with the brand knowledge that is based on the perceived brand value of customers (receivers). This brand knowledge refers to the individual customer perception that is based on descriptive and evaluative brand related information. In this model it is recognisable that the sender-side is based on six elements: brand culture, brand character, brand personality, brand name, brand logos (symbols), and brand slogan (Dasgupta 2010, 199-200; Risitano 2006, 6-7)

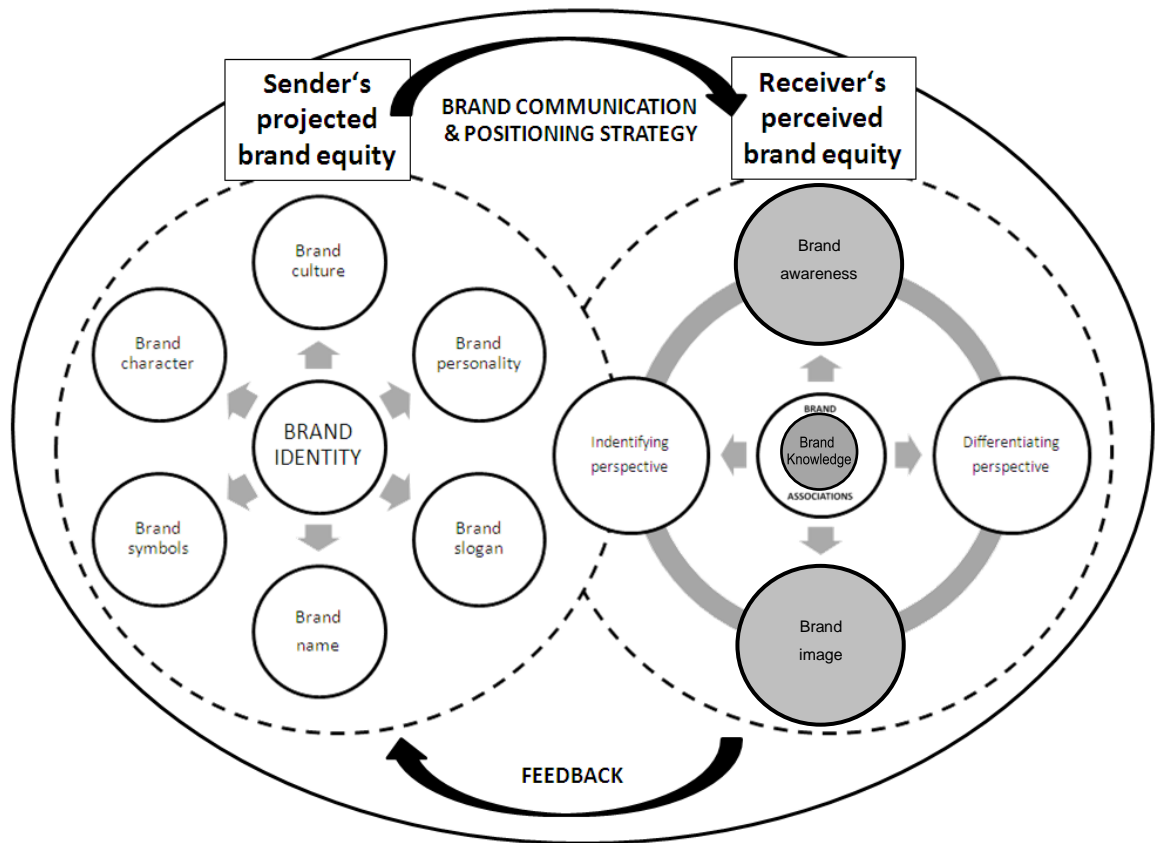


Figure 5. The destination branding model (Risitano 2006, 8)

Brand culture is described by Baker (2010) as stakeholder's commitment and behaviour towards a destination brand promise. This performance of all destination partners enables a place to deliver its planned brand experience by involving all interest groups (Baker 2010). Secondly, brand character is described by Risitano (2006, 7) as an internal constitution. The character of a brand expresses how it is internal perceived in terms of integrity, trustworthiness and honesty of a destination (Risitano 2006, 7). The third term, brand personality refers to the use of human personality traits to express the characteristic of a destination. In that content, a brand name is one other possibility to support brand recognition that can be communicated by a word, letter, or also a group of words and letters. Another important aspect of creating brand recognition is a brand logo. Cassidy (2002) is convinced that a destination logo should make emotional connections, while having power to persuade tourists. Finally, there is a brand slogan that consists of a catchy phrase to express people's experience of a destination (Schawbel 2009). Schawbel (2009) mentions a slogan can be funny or serious. However, slogans

should be effective and original to be easily remembered by current and potential visitors (Schwabel 2009).

The selection of the above listed brand elements are important to represent the identity and analyzing its cohesiveness. These consistent brand elements supplements and support each other in order to form a sound destination image, which is also a contribution to the strength and uniqueness of the identity. In that content, a systematic management of these destination branding elements can help to define the brand equity that is decided by a DMO or other tourism authorities. Often DMOs are the senders of the promotion messages and define brand communication strategies. Ideally, such communication strategies include media and distribution channel approaches to position a destination brand (Risitano 2006, 8.)

2.3.3 Destination positioning

The terms destination branding and positioning are often wrongly used as synonyms (Kolb 2006, 228). However, there is a notable difference since branding processes refer to the identity building process that is projected by a destination. Positioning describes how consumers differentiate between similar destinations (Kolb 2006, 228). In that content, a positioning strategy is essential to express the uniqueness of a destination as promotional message. Different positioning strategies can be applied by destination marketers that are based on the destination's core product (Kolb 2006, 228; Sinha 2006, 3094-3095.)

Destination's product features, services, benefits, or usage can be used for strategic positioning. Firstly, the position of a destination can be characterised by having a special product feature that is exclusive. In this case, unique nature, history, public art, and extraordinary architecture can be used to create a positioning of a destination. Often tourist destinations are similar to competitor products. However, it can create a special position by providing excellent tourism services such as hotels, restaurants, wellness facilities, hiking signposting and so on (Kolb 2006, 228.)

Customer benefits are another possibility to position a destination. Here, the main focus is based on specific intangible benefits (Kolb 2006, 229). For example, small town charm, adventurous nature, and the hospitality of locals. The aspect of usage positioning refers to how a destination can be integrated into a holiday by promoting events such as fairs or musicals (Kolb 2006, 229).

2.4 Instruments for image and brand communication

There are three basic tool sections for communicating and promoting destinations. The first combination consists of slogans and themes. Secondly, there are events and activities. Visual symbols used as instruments belong to the final group of communication tools (Kotler, Haider & Rein 2002, 151.)

A development of a fitting slogan is essential in order to identify a specific campaign for any destination. Thus, successful slogans can be included of complete campaign series. It is vital that a slogan should be a short catchall phrase to represent an overall vision of a certain area or region. Enthusiasm, momentum, and fresh ideas can be generated by slogan concepts. Additionally, good slogans create some kind of base for a further amplification of the place's image. Consequently, tourists should quickly feel appealed to visit this promoted place. Formation of certain themes to attract a specific target group is a more specific form of using catchall slogans such as "Time to make friends" for the football World Cup 2006 in Germany. Sinha (2006, 3094) points out, that all kinds of image messages have to be backed up by real performances of a destination.

In particular marked segments, place's images can also be communicated by events and activities. Successful events can design the image and the brand of a place permanently. Strengthening and enhancing of existing brand images is possible by promoting events with an association set that is consistent with one or more characteristics of the destination image. A sunshine image can be highlighted by choosing events such as volleyball tournaments that emphasize swimming beaches and warm climate. In addition, the event promotion contains some communication activities through media in order to strengthen the brand image associated with sun and beach. However, a sound determi-

nation how a destination is perceived is important before determining events that meet the needs of a destination brand. Destination marketers must decide what kind of aspects of the destination brand should be strengthened, enhanced or changed (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride 2004, 287.)

It has been investigated that the public mind can connect permanently certain landmark sites to a specific area. Popular examples are the Tai Mahal (India), the Great Wall (China), or the Eiffel Tower (France). Those landmarks can greatly embody visual symbols, which can be used as value of brand recognition. Such symbols are often used for official stationeries, brochures, billboards, and other promotion materials. A certain image argument is reinforced by such a visual design element. However, if the visual presence has no connection to the used slogan, themes, and positions, it might be seen as inconsistent concept and undermines the credibility of the place. It is not enough anymore to promote non-urban places only as rural wonderlands with pastoral greenery. In that content, literature brings up four principles of visual strategies (Sinha 2006, 3095.)

Firstly, there is a humorous visual strategy that could visualize treats of a place in an amusing way. A self-parodying perspective in connection with a negative image might be useful to address this issue. The denying strategy is another way of handling negative image aspects. In this case, the target group is overwhelmed by positive images, whereby some blemishes are purposely denied or whitewashed. A major risk in this case is that the place might not meet the expectations by the used images. The third approach is the diverse visual strategy. A wide range of visual images about a place are given. The last strategy is the consistent visual strategy. In contrast to the prior approach, this strategy uses for all promotion activities same visual symbols in order to create a clear and positive image (Sinha 2006, 3095-3096.)

2.5 Internet as marketing instrument

Destination marketing, branding and image formation are revolutionized by the Internet boom. Thus, small DMOs with tiny budgets can achieve similar market reach as large destinations worldwide (Cooper & Hall 2007, 232). Tourists know often perfectly

their holiday destination due to Internet before the actual journey. Therefore, Internet marketing is ideally suited to such products as tourism, since these products are intangible and cannot be tested in advance (Cooper & Hall 2007, 232; TripsbyTips 2009, 1.)

According to Paulo (2000), the tourism sector is characterized by offering complementary services provided by different suppliers. Travelling service assortments can include the use of transportation, accommodation, and the purchase of catering services in order to create an enjoyable experience (Paulo 2000). As earlier discussed, ideal tourism DMOs act as umbrella brands to consolidate their competitive position. Paulo (2000) emphasizes that it is practical to have a major destination portal website as gateway to a destination.

2.5.1 Development of destination websites

Internet presence is becoming one important standard marketing tool within the travel industry, whereby some years ago it was more a trend for insiders (TripsbyTips 2009, 1). Individual businesses and also DMOs as non-profit organizations can benefit from websites. Websites can serve a number of purposes such as e-commerce for selling products directly to final costumers without intermediaries such as retailers. Another function refers to after-sales support and customer service. Finally, websites can be simply used as tool for advertising and public relation (Kolb 2006, 273.)

Website development for tourism organizations takes time, staff, and money as said by Kolb (2006, 273). Especial if tourism organizations have to hire professionals for designing websites. However, today it is also possible to develop with basic computer know-how simple websites. For instance, with the help of different website editor software programmes, which are based on building block concepts with several templates (Kolb 2006, 273.)

The advertisement of destination's features and benefits create the main purpose of destination websites. Such a destination portal presents a set of available products related with a specific destination rather than number of individual tourism supplier websites (Paulo 2000; Kolb 2006, 273.)

Cooper and Hall (2007, 234) emphasize the development of destination websites in terms of flexibility and interactivity. The Extended Model of Internet Commerce Adoption (eMICA model) is the further development of the basic model by Burgess and Cooper through Doolin. Doolin demonstrates in this way the development of destination websites (Gretzel, Law & Fuchs 2010, 52; Cooper & Hall 2007, 234). According to Cooper and Hall (2007, 234), the eMICA model provides destination's marketer a road map of its website development by showing different stages of the Internet presence process. Destination portals move basically through different development stages. The stages start with inception (promotion) through consolidation (provision), and finally to maturity (progressing). A number of additional layers in complexity and functionality are added towards each of these three basic stages. Those additional layers range from very simple to highly sophisticated application to indicate the wide range of Internet commerce development (Burgess, Cooper, Alcock, McNamee & Doolin 2003, 230-231.)

Table 1. Extended model of Internet commerce adoption (Burgess, Cooper, Alcock, McNamee & Doolin 2003, 234)

eMICA Stages	Functionality examples
Stage 1: Promotion	
Level 1: Basic information	Company name, physical address and contact details, business area
Level 2: Rich information	Annual report, email contact, company activity information
Stage 2: Provision	
Level 1: Low interactivity	Basic product catalogue, hyperlinks to further information, online enquiry form
Level 2: Medium interactivity	higher level product catalogues, customer support (e.g. FAQs, sitemaps), industry-specific value-added features
Level 3: High interactivity	chat room, discussion forum, multimedia, newsletters, newsletters
Stage 3: Processing	
	Secure online transactions, order status and tracking, interaction with corporate portal servers

2.5.2 Advantages and disadvantages of tourism websites

One of the main advantages is the communication via the same medium to spread multiple messages that differ for each target group. For instance, pages on a destination portal can be designed differently to appeal families, young singles, and business visitors. Consequently, Web users can easily click on that tab that brings up the needed information (Kolb 2006, 274; Paulo 2000.)

Compare to other promotion media, the costs of changing and updating website information can be less expensive. The latest developments on Internet communities are based on shared interests in connection with some kind of consumption activity. This is an opportunity to observe, contact, and interact with current and potential customers. Such a customer relationship can be also fostered by email activities such as newsletters. Finally, destination portals can be used as public relation tool to present press releases and articles (Cooper & Hall 2007, 232; Kolb 2006, 274; Paulo 2000.)

Kolb (2006, 274) emphasizes that a website cannot be used as only promotion instrument. Nowadays, numerous destination portals are available that Web users will not visit a destination's website accidentally. Destination portals should be supplemented by other promotion mix components, such as advertising, personal selling, and public relations. However, all promotion media should have a reverence to the destination website. Also, tourism suppliers should be aware to refer tourists to the destination website for further information (Kolb 2006, 274.)

2.5.3 Website basic principles

According to Kolb (2006, 275), marketer have to consider that websites as marketing instrument include different design requirements as traditional marketing activities. In that connection, the terms addressability, interactivity, and memory help to understand the electronic characteristics of online-marketing (Kolb 2006, 275; Pride & Ferrel 2007, 98.)

The term addressability refers to the customer identification before the actual purchase activity. Basically, the website design should provide a sufficient information pool that might be desired by potential tourists. Often websites offer users the possibility to register for utilize maximization or access to premium areas. Customer information forms are usually carried out by registration processes. Collected information includes details such as, name, e-mail address, age, tourism product interests, and occupation. This information is useful to marketers to create an individual customer profile to customize future marketing efforts. For additional motivation, some websites offer even contests and prizes for new registered users. This gathered knowledge about individual customer needs and interests enables marketers to narrow down their marketing offers (Kolb 2006, 276; Pride & Ferrel 2007, 81.)

Interactive communication between tourism suppliers and customers is another distinguishing e-marketing characteristic. The term, interactivity refers to the ability of the customer expression in terms of needs and wants directly to the customer service. The concept of online communities can help customers gain added value from offered products and the website itself. The application of such a community provides customers the feeling of a group membership through shared interests. A further interactive application is the use of online blogs, where writers can editorial express themselves and communicate with other customers (Kolb 2006, 276-277; Pride & Ferrel 2007, 81.)

Memory is the e-marketing ability to storage individual information of website users. This customer information includes often data about the purchase history and prior requests. An efficient data use in real time creates the possibility to customize marketing offers to specific customers. One method is the use of sophisticated websites that provide prior information automatically when users use a certain Internet site the next time again. Follow-up e-mails are another approach of Internet memory and deliver only information on request (Kolb 2006, 275; Pride & Ferrel 2007, 98.)

2.6 Design process of websites

A major step is creating the website foundation, which is also called storyboarding. The storyboard process refers to the planning phase of developing a website. This process includes, among other things, the indication of corporate objectives, target market information, consideration of competitor analyses, and individual ideas. Creation of such a storyboard can help to review layout and content before the actual website development begins (Sweeney 2008, 15.)

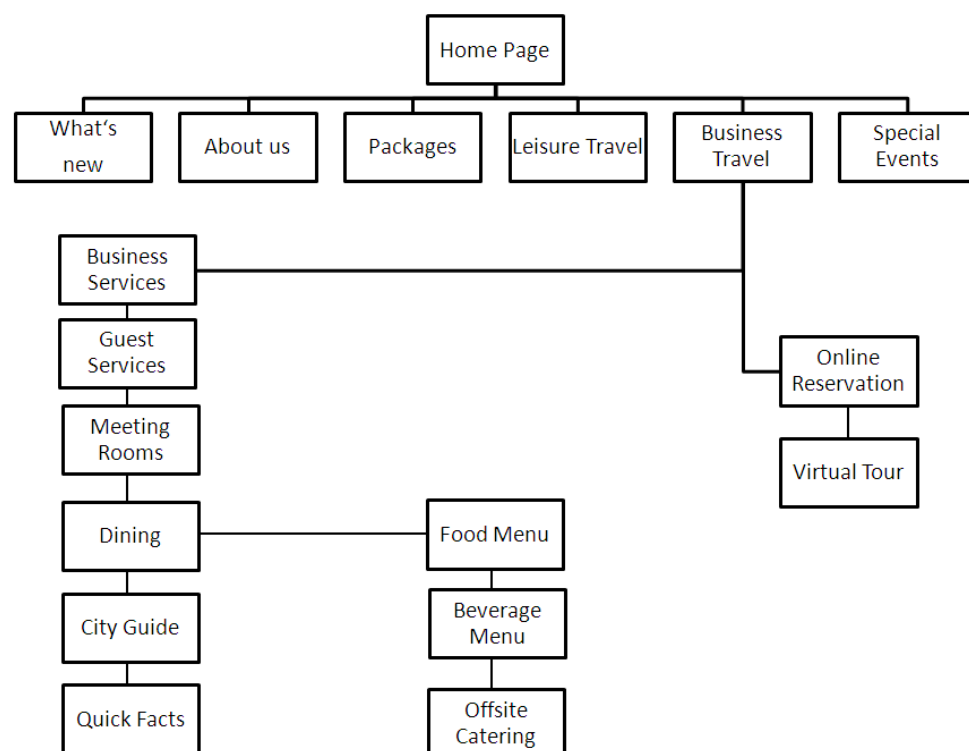


Figure 6. Hotel website storyboard - Example cluster of business travel section (Sweeney 2008, 15.)

Sweeney (2008, 16) and Alka (2010) suggest that after constructing the basic layout of a website, the concrete development of text components, specific content, and graphic elements for each page can be started.

The first step refers to editorial work. Online copywriters need to keep in mind the needs and wants of the target group in order to provide interesting information. Sweeney (2008, 16) emphasizes that professionals can be from the own organization, someone from Web development organization, or from an outsourced third party. Copywriter positions require often advertising or PR know-how in order to get the message across to the clients (Sweeney 2008, 16.)

Sweeney (2008, 16) recommends after reviewing and approving the outcome of the copywriter, the next step of developing a website. This second step is taken by an Internet marketer who is reviewing and editing the basic content of a website. Experienced Internet marketers should have knowledge about search engines, repeat traffic generators, viral and permission marketing. Sweeney (2008, 16) highlights the importance of using available online marketing trends such as podcasts, blogs, communities, and interactive maps.

The third and final step consists of graphic design to develop the “look and feel” for websites. Other graphic components include the navigation bar, the background, and the separator bars. During this process, professionals have to consider consistent online and offline corporate identity. The website can be finally published after everything has been reviewed and approved (Sweeney 2008, 17.)

2.7 Website components

Before the actual beginning of designing a website, few important components need to be considered. The entire website design must fit with the image of the destination’s brand. Texting, content structure, colour, graphic and navigation help to communicate effectively destination images. In addition, websites must provide basic information as rule of thumb. These refer to who is promoting what, when, where, why, how, and to whom (Kolb 2006, 278; Röck 2009, 29; Sweeney 2008, 14-15.)

2.7.1 Text principles

By using few words as possible, copywriters should be able to catch the reader's attention by providing relevant information for current and potential tourists. The reason is that website users tend to pages with less text in order to find quickly what they are looking for. Online copywriting is based on short texts, which get fast to the point, and can be easily scanned by website users. Basically, 80 percent of website users tend to scan online texts as opposed actually reading it. Around 75 percent don't even scroll a page down, which proves that Web is not an ideal reading medium. Thus, websites should include mainly key points in combination with bulleted lists, headers, and horizontal rules for creating a superior outline. The text provides the fundamental tone for a website that is combined with graphic elements to communicate the intended destination image (Sweeney 2008, 18.)

2.7.2 Content principles

The tasks of the Internet marketer include the reviewing and editing of the text and graphics, while ensure the correct use of keywords for high search engine rankings. Therefore, keywords of a Web page should be used already used in the page headline and throughout all text elements of the page. Another important aspect is easily available contact information such as physical address, phone and fax numbers, and the e-mail address (Alka 2010, Sweeney 2008, 16.)

Subject literature points to usual defaults such as "Under Construction" pages. These pages should be avoided since they create no value for any Internet user. Handling of private information leads to another lack in terms of security. Thus, privacy policies can simply counteract this issue and create customer trust for submitting inquiries to websites or joining mailing lists (Sweeney 2008, 17.)

2.7.3 Colour principles

Especially, logos, corporate colours, and other marketing material should be consistent in order to create a value of brand recognition. In that connection, the choices of the

background design and font colours need to be made carefully to construct a pleasant viewing experience for website users. Designers recommend light backgrounds with dark text elements for a properly contrast. Another colour and font style issue is the clear indication of links. Blue links show unvisited links and dark purple links represent already visited links, which is a common application (Alka 2010.)

2.7.4 Navigation principles

First of all, the provision of a navigation bar in a consistent location on every page allows users an easy orientation. Moreover, Internet users might not necessarily come to the home page at first, since search engines can index any page from a website. In addition, each single page should provide links at the bottom to go back to the top without scrolling all the way back. Otherwise this is considered as a page with a death end. In conclusion, consistent-positioned navigation bars with functioning links are vital for efficient website navigation (Alka 2010; Sweeney 2008, 19-20.)

2.7.5 Graphic principles

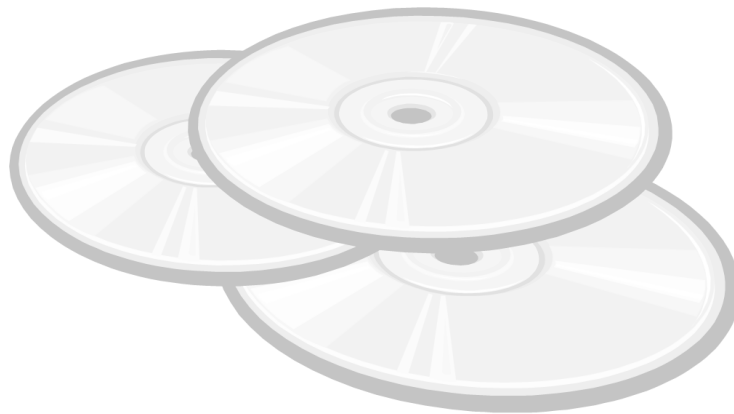
Another important aspect is the compressed size of text and graphic elements to avoid long download times. Statistics show that many users are leaving websites before they can actually see it. Other people turn even graphics off in their Internet browsers to save time. Therefore, it is vital to provide information in text form for used graphics. If graphics do not display, this alternative text will be loaded instead of images. This descriptive text application is called Alt attributes that is associated with respective images. Furthermore, search engines rankings will be improved (Alka 2010; Sweeney 2008, 20.)

Thumbnail graphics are another possibility to avoid longer download periods. This application is useful for travel and tourism websites with various large images. Such smaller thumbnail versions of images give the website users the choice of looking only at those larger versions they are interested in seeing (Sweeney 2008, 20-21.)

The third common problem of tourism pages refers to the use of large map images. Such maps are often large graphic elements with additional clickable elements (“hot spots”) and embedded texts. However, search engines are not able to read embedded text elements. Thus, maps should always provide Alt tags for effective search engine rankings. Also, long download times can be caused by huge map images besides inefficient search rankings. By using outsized map graphics, customers must wait at first to download the entire image before to understand the navigation. An alternative idea is to split the maps into small sections to provide short loading times as possible (Sweeney 2008, 21.)

3 Lahn-Dill-Bergland website development

The empirical data in this section of the thesis is mainly based on the website design process, which is electronically recorded. Additional information are collected from meetings with LDB and professional graphic design respondents. The division of the empirical data includes 3.1 Presentation of study target, 3.2 Project plan, 3.3 Project implementation, and 3.4 Presentation of results.



4 Discussion

This final section of the thesis includes a discussion of the thesis' learning results regarding the case study project. In addition to this there is a presentation of contributions made from this project-based work, both theoretical and practical. Finally, conclusions are presented as well as the connection to the thesis purpose and suggestions for further research are demonstrated.

In conclusion, destination marketing and branding are gaining more importance as tourists consume regions. Often, people are not aware that there are a great number of individually produced products/services bundled into a holiday experience, which are consumed under a destination brand. During this study, it has been discovered that the concentration of tourism industry and technology development create new challenges, especially for rural destinations. In this content, destination marketers have to create strategies to coordinate stakeholders to match the fitting demand with supply. This reconciliation of interests can be realized by using the entire possibilities of marketing instruments to communicate with current and potential customers. The case study shows that destination websites play an important role in tourism branding, but often in practice not well understood.

There are many factors affecting the success of destination marketing and branding efforts online. In this content, this paper focuses on four possible aspects. Firstly, there is the process clarification of place marketing by Freyer, Naumann and Schuler (2007, 45-46) to define place promoter, place as product, and the target group. Secondly, different destination marketing strategies were explored, which included the unique selling proposition, synergy strategy, and the image and brand strategy. Afterwards, the actual introduction into destination marketing and branding is based on the prior mentioned principles. Supplementary, brand strategies and branding communication models are introduced before this work concentrates on destination website design as final topic.

The primary goal of this work is the investigation and development of a renewed website presence for LDB. This project outcome includes a redesigned website layout in

terms of content and design elements. Thus, the main contribution of this work is it to form a positive first impression as an interesting tourism destination brand. In connection with destination marketing, this study shows that websites are an important feature to inspire potential trip planners. As discovered in the theoretical part of this thesis, different destination branding elements and website design factors have the greatest impact in order to develop an appealing destination portal. Consequently, offered tourism products/services are mainly experiential products so that website design can take advantage of Internet technology innovations to create sensory associations.

Especially, the consistent use of the corporate identity and the corporate design in all used media of LDB will create an image in the customer's mind. The website presents an "online business card" of each holiday destination in order to make an interesting impression within a short period. Comparisons of other destination German websites showed that the usability and aesthetic aspects of websites are vital for average regions to stand out from competitor destinations. LDB targets younger families and best-agers who identify themselves as nature-lovers and outdoor-activists. The closeness to the nature is a shared interest by current and potential LDB-visitors. This nature aspect is also reflected by the website-design as green landscape and a hiker in the bottom part of the page. The primary color combination is based on warm green and brown tones. Complementary, the textured background, pictures and the fonts are in harmony with the chosen color concept. In contrast to the original LDB website, the redesigned website provides more clear and structured information. A navigation bar with understandable sub-sections enables website-users to find information easier and quickly.

Once again, the primary focus of this project-oriented thesis is to gain basic knowledge about destination marketing in the Web environment. The site was developed and based on personal experiences and understandings of website-design in a theoretical and practical manner. This resulted in an outcome defined by narrowed-down and highly partial view that is supposed to appeal a multitude of individuals to the same destination. Therefore, future research can be designed to answer the following questions.

- (1) Can LDB identify themselves with the redesigned website layout?
- (2) Are more website-users attracted by this renewed website?
- (3) Are the different “eMICA-Stages” (compare 2.5.1) applicable to this redesigned website?

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